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TAGS: PREL MARR ETRD GG RS
SUBJECT: GEORGIA-RUSSIA: FM BEZHUASHVILI GETS RUSSIA'S
MESSAGE

Classified By: AMBASSADOR WILLIAM J. BURNS. Reason 1.4 (b, d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Georgian FM Bezhuashvili told Ambassador November 2 that he "got the message" passed to him bluntly November 1 by FM Lavrov and Security Council Secretary Igor Ivanov: that the Russians believe Georgia will begin military action in Abkhazia or South Ossetia; that Russia will confront Georgia militarily if that happens; and that the Russians don't care if this means taking on the rest of the international community. Bezhuashvili assured the Russians that Georgia has no plans for military action. He passed a blunt message of his own: that recognition of separatist entities would have grave consequences. He sought assurances that the Russians are not planning to activate the conflicts as pressure against Georgia. Ivanov replied that Russia will not. It will not recognize South Ossetia or Abkhazia, nor is it interested in "regime change." The Russians made clear they will not relax sanctions and that they will campaign to stop military sales to Georgia -- their way of reducing Georgian capacity to wage war.

¶2. (C) Bezhuashvili thought his talks began a valuable dialogue to "create space" now that Russia's emotions are calming down. But Ivanov made clear to him that engagement is still problematic: Putin is personally making all decisions related to Georgia, and Putin remains angry and humiliated. End Summary.

Talks -- Tough Talks

¶3. (C) Ambassador met Georgian Foreign Minister Gela Bezhuashvili (at the FM's request) for 1 1/2 hours on November 2. Ambassador led off with a readout of the Secretary's talks with Putin on Georgia. Ambassador

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understood from a November 1 conversation with FM Lavrov that the message to Bezhuashvili would be similar to what Putin told the Secretary: Russia is not looking to do more to harm Georgia, but the Georgians have to understand that Russia would respond with force to a Georgian attack on Abkhazia or South Ossetia.

¶4. (C) Bezhuashvili said he had come with limited expectations. The good news from his talks is that he and the Russians have agreed on a public line: that the dialogue continues. But, he said, the dialogue is tough.

War Means War

¶5. (C) After a "standard" large-format meeting with Lavrov November 1, Bezhuashvili got down to brass tacks with Ivanov

in a one-on-one meeting later that evening. Ivanov made clear several times -- and Bezhuashvili kept returning to it as the central point -- that Russia believes Georgia is planning to start violence. If that happens, Russia will respond with direct force. If that means confronting the whole international community, so be it. Russia will not care what damage it does to its relations with the U.S. or Europe; a Georgian initiation of hostilities will mean direct Russian military response. Bezhuashvili said Georgia has no plans to start fighting. Ivanov said Russia does not trust Georgia and needs assurances at the highest level. Bezhuashvili asked whether his assurances were not high-level enough, and Ivanov answered, "No." Ambassador commented to Bezhuashvili that this tracked with what we understand: the Russians are not fooling.

¶6. (C) Bezhuashvili told his interlocutors that Georgia, too, needs assurances. It sees Russian rhetoric and sanctions as preparing public opinion for war. Georgia needs a guarantee that the Russians will not activate the conflicts to pressure Georgia. Ivanov said Russia will not. He said Russia does not seek either to annex or recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He denied Russia has any plans for "regime change." He said Russia understands Saakashvili has public support, and added that Russia no longer has the capacity to engage in such adventures. Ivanov agreed that sanctions will not isolate Georgia. Ivanov said the only way to re-build trust is to tone down the rhetoric (with which Bezhuashvili readily agreed) and sign bilateral agreements with the Abkhaz and South Ossetians on the non-use of force. Bezhuashvili replied that the non-use of force is already enshrined in the 1994 Moscow Agreement. Taking non-use of force out of the context of overall peace settlements is useless for Georgia. Georgia will soon present packages of proposals on both Abkhazia and South Ossetia that include non-use of force in the context of an overall solution.

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¶7. (C) Ambassador asked whether Bezhuashvili's interlocutors had focused on the Kodori Gorge. Bezhuashvili said no; Kodori had just been an excuse for Russia to apply pressure. It came up briefly with Lavrov, who asserted that, to comply with UNSCR 1716, Georgia had to withdraw its troops from Kodori. Bezhuashvili said there are no military personnel in Kodori, and 1716 makes no mention of police, which will not be withdrawn. Lavrov dropped the issue.

Sanctions as Arms Control

¶8. (C) Bezhuashvili said his interlocutors made clear that, though not interested in imposing further sanctions, current economic sanctions will remain. Russia will also attempt to stop military sales to Georgia. Both measures are aimed at reducing Georgia's capacity to increase its military strength, Bezhuashvili said -- the former by "starving" its budget and the latter by stunting its army. Bezhuashvili told Ambassador that Georgia needs a better military in part to gain a better diplomatic negotiating position. He agreed when Ambassador stressed that all advantage will be lost if the military is actually used directly.

¶9. (C) Bezhuashvili said he had told the Russians Georgia will not deviate from its goal to reunite the country. He said the Russians understood. They believe it can and must be done through negotiations. Bezhuashvili said this is possible if Russia does not interfere and becomes an honest broker. He recounted what Putin said when Saakashvili used the same phrase in their last meeting: "Why should we?"

¶10. (C) Ambassador asked whether the Russians had focused on Georgia's NATO aspirations. Bezhuashvili said no. The main reason for Russian aggressiveness, he believed, is Putin's personal feeling of humiliation. Ivanov had made clear: nobody but Putin can make decisions on Georgia. For this

reason, no senior Russian will engage with the Georgians. Ivanov was only meeting with Bezhuaashvili because they had a personal relationship. Nor were the Russians eager to see Bezhuaashvili return to help "shape" the atmosphere before the November 28 CIS summit in Minsk. He discussed a visit by Parliament Speaker Burjanadze as an alternative, but got no clear response beyond Ivanov's flat assertion that she would not get a meeting with Putin.

Going on From Here

¶11. (C) Bezhuaashvili agreed with Ambassador that the Russians seem to be calming down after the strong emotions of October. Lavrov had assured him there would be no disruption of gas or electricity this winter. Ambassador noted that Bezhuaashvili's calm statement at the BSEC ministerial (Septel) is a model for making Georgia's points while keeping the situation calm. On WTO, Georgia may gain more concessions by engaging in multilateral discussions with Russia rather than blocking those discussions. Bezhuaashvili agreed, and said that was the strategy he had ordered to his representative at the Geneva talks. The Russians had not raised WTO in either of his meetings in Moscow.

¶12. (C) Bezhuaashvili summed up his impressions by saying Georgia has "crossed the point of no return" with Russia. It cannot get agreement from Russia on strategy. It is therefore important to be extremely careful about tactics to avoid "dancing the wrong tango" with Russia, especially over the next 3-6 months. Ambassador noted the unanimity of Russian views: even the most liberal Russian politicians are angry about Georgia and agree that if there is any bloodshed, Russia must step in and win.

¶13. (C) That being the case, Bezhuaashvili continued, he will return to Tbilisi and develop strategies on how best to deal with the Russians and how best to enlist Georgia's European and American partners. He believed Georgia should seek areas to engage and cooperate between the Russian and Georgian militaries (including the PKFs). Economic opportunities will have to wait. Rhetoric will have to be toned all the way down, with appropriate criticism of Russian policies in private and in relevant multilateral fora. Bezhuaashvili said he will try to activate GUAM to gain multilateral leverage. He has been in Baku and will soon visit Chisinau and Kyiv. He will also visit France, Finland (again), Norway, and Sofia for a "New Group of Friends" meeting. He praised the recent European Parliament resolution on Georgia ("I couldn't have written it better myself"), and looked forward to Saakashvili's address before that body.

¶14. (C) With regard to Georgia's partners, Bezhuaashvili hoped

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they can make Russia understand the dangers of recognizing Abkhazia or South Ossetia. Just as an outbreak of bloodshed could produce an irrational and counterproductive response from Russia, so too could Russian recognition of the separatists produce such a response from Georgia. Bezhuaashvili said he had stressed this to the Russians as many times as the Russians had stressed to him the consequences of fighting; he hoped the West would reiterate the point.

Comment

¶15. (C) The resumed dialogue is part of a perceptible lowering of the emotional tone. The Georgian Embassy told us there is a "visible decrease" in harassment of ethnic Georgians in Russia. That is a narrow foundation to build wider trust, but it is all that is available for the moment. Bezhuaashvili made clear that he understands that the situation in Moscow is very different from Tbilisi's perception. When he returns to Tbilisi, he said he will try

to make Saakashvili and his inner circle realize that. He implied that this will not be an easy task. He did not mention DefMin Okruashvili's assertion that Russia is scared of war, but that is clearly on his mind. From the perspective of Moscow, a lot depends on how well Bezhuaashvili can get his points across when he gets home. Saber-rattling and fiery rhetoric play into Russia's strengths and Georgia's weaknesses.

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